Symbols of Behaviour in mid-17th Century English Coffee Houses

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Coffee drinking became popularized in England during the dawning of the Commonwealth period and into mid-18th century. The interest in this beverage predates its replacement, tea, as the iconic national drink of Britain. This article will examine two artefacts that played a role in the culture surrounding the 17th century coffee house. The first artefact is a coffee house token from Morat’s, a London coffee establishment. A broadside entitled ‘A Brief Description of the Excellent Vertues of that Sober and wholesome Drink Called Coffee, and its Incomparable Effects in Preventing or Curing, Most Diseases Incident to Humane Bodies’ will also be discussed. Together these objects help to reflect the actions and activities behind the culture of these popular establishments.

Almost one hundred years separate the beginning of the Ottoman coffee houses and those starting in London. The first coffee house opened in Constantinople in 1554-55, during the reign of Süleyman I. Merchants associated with the Levant Company helped bring the popular social phenomenon to England. As was the custom with the Turks, coffee houses were a welcoming and relaxing place to conduct business or converse. All walks of life would be represented there and able to partake in sharing the friendly and social experience. This practice was transferred to England with all the sociability intact. The idea of the coffee house was welcomed by most of the interested public. Having numerous social and political issues to discuss during the Commonwealth era helped prepare patrons for the Restoration and the resulting discourse and debate. The coffee house idea was so successful that by 1708, there were ‘as many as five or six hundred in London and Westminster alone’.

Originally simple single rooms, usually upstairs, these locations were designed for coffee and conversation. Enjoyed by locals as well as foreign visitors, Henri Misson, in his 1698 visit to London, states:

These Houses, which are very numerous in London, are extremely convenient. You have all manner of news there: you have a good Fire, which you may sit by as long as you please; you have a Dish of Coffee; you meet your Friends for the transaction of Business, and all for a penny, if you do not care to spend more.

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Coffee houses offered a forum where ideas could be freely debated by a wider and diverse public audience. Symbols of these sanctuaries of deliberation help to reconstruct the important legacy of the 17th century coffee house.

Broadsides, or broadsheets, can be considered an ancestor of the newspaper. It was a single sheet and printed on only one side. Early uses for the broadside could range from announcements and advertisements to proclamations and news. These, along with pamphlets, were set out for patrons to read and discuss in the coffee houses. One must remember that literacy was low during this period and broadsheets were printed without any illustrations. However, with time and improved methods, broadsheets eventually included more sophisticated illustrations from the original and simple wood block artwork.3

The first illustrated broadside dealing with coffee and its effects was published in 1674.4 It had the lengthy title of ‘A Brief Description of the Excellent Vertues of that Sober and wholesome Drink, Called Coffee, and its Incomparable Effects in Preventing or Curing Most Diseases Incident to Humane Bodies.’ Appended to this were ‘The Rules and Orders of the Coffee-House.’ This broadside was printed for Paul Greenwood and was ‘to be sold at the sign of the Coffee-Mill and Tobacco Roll’, indicating Greenwood’s establishment. This could be considered an advertisement broadsheet, since they did appear in London coffee houses in the 17th century.5

The creation of this broadside can be viewed as a rebuttal to initial critics of coffee consumption. An early opponent, and the first one of note, was the satirical broadside entitled, A Cup of Coffee or Coffee in its Colours (1663). One criticism made was that Englishmen wanted to adopt the indulgences of the Turks, which included coffee drinking and the perceived negative effects.6 There was also a fear that drinking this Middle Eastern concoction would diminish the Christian spirit of the consumer. In the interval between 1660 and 1675, there were a number of written tracts on the subject of London coffee houses. Half of the writings have the words ‘character of a coffee house’ in their titles.7 Evidently, coffee houses were controversial enough to continue the dialogue.

Not only xenophobes or health-conscious advocates could be responsible for such propaganda. The tavern and ale-house proprietors were also troubled about the loss of patrons to the ever-growing number of coffee houses. The one-time monopoly now faced competition for its customers.8 An educated faction of society now has another outlet for discourse among like-minded people in an environment conducive to discussion, debate and discovery. This could be considered trading one intoxicating environment for another without the potential hangover.

3 <ilab.org/eng/documentation/1119-a_brief_history_of_broadsides.htmlzz>.
7 Ukers, All About Coffee, p. 61.
8 Ukers, p. 61.
Figure 1. Anon, A Brief Description of… Coffee, Broadside, 1674 © The British Library Board, C.20.f.
The broadside in question has an engraving centered within the title atop the page. Pictured in the upper cell is a coffee shrub with a decorative crown and the words ‘The Desarts of Arabia’; next to this is a grape vine, also posed with a crown. This depiction sets up the comparison between wine and ale with coffee in the poem, ‘A Brief Description of the Excellent Vertues of that Sober and wholesome Drink Called Coffee, and its Incomparable Effects in Preventing or Curing, Most Diseases Incident to Humane bodies’ (Appendix). Throughout the poem, the healthy and healing benefits of coffee are touted regarding the ‘all-healing – Berry’ and the resulting state of being ‘sober and Merry’. Artistically speaking, the poem implies that the muse of music and poetry should again be invigorating coffee.

The lower cell depicts the interior of a coffee house. Pictured in the engraving is a simply furnished room with a long table and five gentlemen seated around it. The style of dress indicates different social classes and business interests. Two have hats while another is seen smoking. The ‘coffee boy’ is carrying a pot to fill their coffee ‘dishes.’ This simple woodcut refers to ‘The RULES and ORDERS of the COFFEE-HOUSE’ on the broadside. One could argue that the public space is an egalitarian or democratic setting. Without any apparent hierarchal seating, it signals that all classes can interact equally.

The poem and its title are ironic when discussing the coffee house as a functioning social unit. ‘Rules and Orders’ was more commonly associated with judicial courts and laws, not a sober and serious public house. Customers had expectations upon entering these establishments. The code of behavior was different from that of a concert hall or even a tavern. Coffee house discourse became the norm and the expected conduct of the patrons. The coffee house patrons were aware of the parameters of behaviour before entering, which is what separated it from other venues.

The broadside was published fourteen years after Cromwell’s reign ended. It was the Puritan world of the 1650s that ushered in the newest form of a public house to England. The Lord Protector saw no harm in having these austere temperance-minded institutions proliferate the realm. Unlike ale-houses and taverns of the past, customers visiting coffee houses came for coffee, conversation and camaraderie. The broadside may have harkened back to an earlier time of civility in the public space, a symbolic reminder of how unbiased and democratic the coffee house milieu was in the beginning. Possibly the potential fear in 1674 was losing that type of civil and cultured environment.

After the Great Fire occurred in 1666, not only did London rebuild but, due to their growing popularity, there were many new and larger coffee houses opening all over the city. Since their inception, coffee houses were well known to have the black drink with sobering properties. Because of this, coffee houses attracted many inebriated customers after the taverns closed. With this influx of undesirables, and through time, the coffee house image and overall reputation suffered considerably from its distinctive beginnings. The Commonwealth institution began to evolve during the Restoration period. This was the beginning of when coffee houses made a major contribution to the social life of England.

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9 Ukers, p. 57.
An economic and cultural phenomenon existed in 17th century Britain. A short-lived anomaly was the introduction of trade tokens. These ‘unofficial’ coins helped to fill a void that was exacerbated by the monarchy. Throughout many reigns, having enough coins of the realm in circulation had been an enduring problem for the expanding empire. There was a perennial demand for coins in small enough denominations to assist in daily business transactions. It was this prolonged shortage of royal coins (half pennies and farthings) that demanded attention for the ever-growing number of businesses and shopkeepers. To assist the realm’s economic and trade expansion, some form of action was needed.

Eventually, out of frustration with an inactive government, trade and shop owners created their own unofficial and illegal currency, tokens. Although earlier tokens had existed, this concerted action was undertaken just as the Commonwealth period began. This was done without any interference or government permission. The disengaged leadership’s approach can be due to being a newly installed government but also its unwillingness to coin money in metals other than silver or gold. Trade tokens were issued during various times in British history. Commercial purposed tokens, especially for London, date to the middle of the 14th century. However, the token period being examined is the middle of the 17th century (1648-72). It has been estimated that 12,000 types of tokens were issued in the British Isles during this era; in London alone, the number produced was estimated at 3,500. The tokens were struck with dies and were mainly three values: farthing, halfpenny and penny. Chiefly made of copper or brass, the vast majority produced were farthings and halfpennies. The peak time of trade token production was 1666-67, probably coinciding with London’s recovery, followed by a rapid decline in the number being struck and their falling out of usage. This was largely due to royal proclamations banning their use and official coins of the realm being issued.

Tokens shed light on the habits, customs and overall domestic life of people at that time. These tokens usually had the name of the issuer on the obverse side with a depiction of the trade or business in question and on the reverse side was the place of issue, their initials and usually that of the proprietor’s wife. The value or denomination was usually, but not always, obvious. This illegal tender was created to fill the void of coin change needed in peoples’ daily transactions. The issuer would use the tokens as currency in his place of business. In turn, trade tokens could circulate anywhere, provided the tradesman was willing to accept them. Owners preferred to handle tokens of establishments known to them, because redemption of tokens for royal currency could only take place at the point of origin.

12 Dickinson, Seventeenth Century Tokens of the British Isles and their values, p. 1.
13 Dickinson, p. 2.
15 Berry, Taverns and Tokens of Pepys’ London, pp. 9-10.
Coffee houses began in mid-17th century England, originating in 1650 Oxford. The earliest establishment, which appeared in London in 1652, was operated by Pasqua Rosée on St. Michael’s Alley. There were about eighty different types of tokens (penny and half penny) issued during the mid-1660s and early 1670s by the city coffee houses. The earliest dated coffee house token debuted in 1664. Almost one half of the London coffee tokens were issued from 1669 to 1671, about twenty of them valued at a penny.17

One of London’s coffee establishments was Morat’s Coffee House, opened in 1662 on Exchange Alley. Other names used for the same establishment have been, according to Bryant Lillywhite: Turk’s Head, Great Turk, and Great Coffee House. Morat’s was noteworthy due to the number of tokens it created in such a short life as a coffee house; however, it was destroyed in 1666 during the Great Fire and was never rebuilt. Unfortunately, there is a gap in the record as to the name of the proprietor. During its brief existence, four examples of coffee tokens were created. All made of brass, but without minting dates, three were penny tokens and the fourth had a halfpenny value.19

Figure 2 shows a penny token with the inscription (obverse) ‘Great Men Did Mee Call’ and a bust of Turkish Sultan Amurath IV, the Ottoman ruler from 1623 to 1640. On the reverse side is the inscription ‘Where Eare I Came I Conquered All; Coffee Tobacco Sherbet Tea and Chocolat reta’l’d in Exchange Ally’.20 The word ‘Tea’ does not appear on any other token than those

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17 Berry, 17th c England: Traders and their Tokens, p. 25.
issued from ‘the Great Turk’ (aka Morat’s) coffee house in Exchange Alley.21 Perhaps this foreshadowed the eventual demise of coffee for tea as the country’s beverage of choice.

Although a tyrant at home, Morat/Amurath IV was ‘popular’ with the English in the 1660s. His likeness appeared on many of the thirty or so London tokens that feature a Turk’s visage.22 In order to aid customers in locating their desired establishment, coffee house proprietors used hanging signs on the outside façade with the corresponding image, usually the same one on the token. Hence, in advertisements or announcements, the coffee house was referred to as ‘under the Sign of the Great Turk’. One must remember that as a large percentage of the population at this time was unable to read or write, the image on the token would be recognized and serve as a point of reference.23

Contemporary accounts are rare regarding the use of tokens. Samuel Pepys does not write about or refer to trade tokens once in the entire Diary, although he must have encountered them during visits to those establishments. The years of his writings (1660-69) occur during the height of trade token popularity.24 Pepys visited Morat’s at least on one occasion. He noted that on Thursday, 28 May 1663:

At the Coffee-house in Exchange – ally I bought a little book, Counsell to Builders, written by Sir Balth Gerbier, it is dedicated almost to all the men of any great condition in England, so that the epistles are more than the book itself; and both it and them not worth a turd, that I am ashamed that I bought it.25

The coffee house mentioned above is likely also to be the issuer of the token (fig 2). These establishments, especially in London, also served as shops for the citizenry. Some, including Morat’s, also functioned as booksellers, stationers and post offices.26

Coffee house tokens helped to unify the neighborhood in which it was located. It gave a sense of identity to not only the establishment but also to its patrons. Being seen as a community center for a variety of reasons, coffee houses also helped to alleviate the shortage of needed specie through the issuance of tokens, an action which created a strong psychological and economic allegiance for the inhabitants to their local trades.27 All the while, tokens acted as a form of advertising and helped bring repeat business.

The tokens helped to symbolize a sense of liberty and freedom from the idle government regarding the specie problems. Even though government largely ignored the issuing and usage of tokens, it was still an unlawful act. These tokens undermined the legal and legitimate tender of the realm. An attempt was made or at least to discourage such actions and many

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26 Berry, p. 121.
were called before the King and his Privy Council for their illegal ‘coyning of coffee pence’.\textsuperscript{28} It also must be remembered that each coffee house generated a substantial amount of tax revenue for the crown, at the same time dispensing ‘counterfeit coins.’ How easy it would be to arrest the offenders just by looking at their tokens for their name and address, but it was not until three royal proclamations were issued between 1672 and 1674 that brought an eventual end for tokens.\textsuperscript{29} The defiance and the egalitarian environment of the coffee house would eventually lead to change, since tokens could be viewed as democratic by their nature.

Coffee house tokens were created by and for the people. Government was not part of the process; instead, the ordinary, hard-working masses filled the void and solved the problem, eventually receiving the notice of the monarchy.\textsuperscript{30} In the same way, people were also creating a democratic model via the coffee house. This public space appealed to many and served an important function in society. Symbolically, the coffee house had a major impact on 17th-century culture.

Coffee house behaviour, whether intentional or not, is exemplified by way of the two artefacts. The broadside, with ‘rules of behaviour’ included, showed possibly an ideal and sober setting for civilized discourse regarding matters of the day. Maybe this was indeed a satirical posting of etiquette for 1674 coffee houses; it did, in fact, elicit in a pictorial way, attention to the existence of a locale possessing a code of behaviour. That place was the coffee houses of the time and the behaviour was egalitarian in nature, a rarity where people from all walks of life could come together and interact in a setting that would become popular for approximately a century. This democratic approach, offering a center for free expression and communication, helped create the stage for future political and ideological dialogue that would lead to the evolving behaviour of an egalitarian England. At the same time, coffee house tokens also were an indication of a democratic undercurrent taking place. Taking matters into their own hands, while perpetrating an illegal act, the token creators and the people using them, were all guilty. The government may have looked the other way for a while, but the shared despair of the people helped mould the citizenry into seeking further democratic reform. Tokens connected people of those localities that shared the trades depicted on the symbolic and counterfeit coinage. The two artefacts contrast with each other, one depicting ‘ideal behaviour’ and the other, just the opposite. Together they combine to illustrate how the actions taken are both egalitarian and democratic while symbolically indicating the political course England had set on.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Cowan, p. 180.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Dickinson, \textit{Seventeenth Century Tokens of the British Isles and their values}, p. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Williamson, ‘Historical Evidence and Information Gathered from the Traders’ Tokens of the Seventeenth Century and from the Minor Currency’, p. 172.
\end{itemize}
A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE EXCELLENT VERTUES OF THAT Sober and wholesome Drink, CALLED COFFEE AND ITS INCOMPARABLE EFFECTS IN PREVENTING or CURING MOST DISEASES INCIDENT TO HUMANE BODIES.

When the sweet Poison of the Treacherous Grape,  
Had Acted on the world a General Rape;  
Drowning our very Reason and our Souls  
In such deep Seas of large o'reflowing Bowls,  
That New Philosophers Swore they could feel  
The Earth to Stagger, as her Sons did Reel:  
When Foggy Ale, leavying up mighty Trains  
Of muddy Vapours, had besiegd our Brains;  
And Drink, Rebellion, and Religion too,  
Made Men so Mad, they knew not what to do;  
Then Heaven in Pity, to Effect our Cure,  
And stop the Ragings of that Calenture,  
First sent amongst us this All-healing-Berry,  
At once to make us both Sober and Merry.  
Arabian Coffee, a Rich Cordial  
To Purse and Person Beneficial,  
Which of so many Vertues doth partake,  
Its Country’s called Felix for its sake.  
From the Rich Chambers of the Rising Sun,  
Where Arts, and all good Fashions first begun,  
Where Earth with Choicest Rarities is blest,  
And dying Phoenix builds Her wondrous Nest:  
COFFEE arrives, that Grave and wholesome Liquor,  
That heals the Stomach, makes the Genius quicker,  
Relieve, the Memory, Revives the Sad,  
And chears the Spirits, without making Mad;  
For being of a Cleansing QUALITY,  
By NATURE warm, Attenuating and Dry,  
Its constant Use the sullenest Griefs will Rout,  
Removes the Dropsie, gives ease to the Gout,  
And soon dispatcheth wheresoever it finds  
Scorbutick Humours, Hypochondriack winds,  
Rheums, Ptsicks, Palsies, Jaundise, Coughs, Catarrhs,  
And whatsoe’re with Nature leavyeth Wars;  
It helps Digestion, want of Appetite,  
And quickly sets Consumptive Bodies Right;  
A Friendly Entercourse it doth Maintain,  
Between the Heart, the Liver, and the Brain,  
Natures three chiepest Wheels, whose Jars we know,  
Threaten the whole Microcosme with overthrow;  
In Spring, when Peccant Humours Encrease most,  
And Summer, when the Appetitite is lost,  
In Autumn, when Raw Fruits Diseases Breed,  
And Winter time too cold to Purge or Bleed;  
Do but this Rare ARABIAN Cordial Use,
And thou may’st all the Doctors Slops Refuse.
Hush then, dull QUACKS, your Mountebanking cease,
COFFEE’s a speedier Cure for each Disease;
How great its Vertues are, we hence may think,
The Worlds third Part makes it their common Drink;
The Amorous Gallant, whose hot Reins do fail,
Stung by Conjunction with the Dragons-Tail:
Let him but Tipple here, shall find his Grief
Discharg’d, without the Sweting-Tubs Relief;
Nor have the LADIES Reason to Complain,
As fumbling Doe-littles are apt to Faign;
COFFEE’s no Foe to their obliging Trade,
By it Me rather are more Active made;
’Tis stronger Drink, and base adulterate Wine,
Enfeebles Vigour, and makes Nature Pine;
Loaden with which, th’ Impotent Sott is Led
Like a Sowc’d Hogshead to a Misses Bed;
But this Rare Settle-Brain prevents those Harms,
Conquers Old Sherry, and brisk Clarret charms.
Sack, I defie thee with an open Throat,
Whilst Trusty COFFEE is my Antedote;
Methinks I hear Poets Repent th’have been,
So long Idolaters to that sparkling Queen;
For well they may perceive ‘tis on Her score
APOLLO keeps them all so Cursed Poor;
Let them avoid Her tempting Charms and then
We hope to see the Wits grow Aldermen;
In Brief, all you who Healths Rich Treasures Prize,
And Court not Ruby Noses, or blear’d Eyes,
But own Sobriety to be your Drift,
And Love at once good Company and thirst;
To Wine no more make Wit and Coyn a Trophy,
But come each Night and Frollique here in Coffee.

The RULES and ORDERS of the COFFEE-HOUSE.

Enter Sirs freely, But first if you please,
Peruse our Civil-Orders, which are these.

First, Gentry, Tradesmen, all are welcome hither,
And may without Affront sit down Together:
Pre-eminence of Place, none here should Mind,
But take the next fit Seat that he can find:
Nor need any, if Finer Persons come,
Rise up for to assigne to them his Room;
To limit Mens Expence, we think not fair,
But let him forfeit Twelve-pence that shall Swear:
He that shall any Quarrel here begin,
Shall give each Man a Dish t’ Atone the Sin;
And so shall He, whose Complements extend
So far to drink in COFFEE to his Friend;
Let Noise of loud Disputes be quite forborn,
No Maudlin Lovers here in Corners Mourn,
But all be Brisk, and Talk, but not too much
On Sacred things, Let none presume to touch,
Nor Profane Scripture, or sawcily wrong
Affairs of State with an irreverent Tongue:
Let Mirth be Innocent, and each Man see,
That all his Jests without Reflection be;
To keep the House more Quiet, and from Blame,
We Banish hence Cards, Dice, and Every Game:
Nor can allow of Wagers, that Exceed
Five shillings, which oft-times much trouble Breed;
Let all that’s lost, or forfeited, be spent
In such Good Liquor as the House doth Vent,
And Customers endeavour to their Powers,
For to observe still seasonable Howers.
Lastly, Let each Man what he calls for Pay,
And so you’re welcome to come every Day.

London, Printed for Paul Greenwood, and are to be sold at the sign of the Coffee-
Mill and Tobacco-Roll in Cloath-fair near West-Smithfield, who selleth the best
Arabian Coffee-Powder and Chocolate, made in Cake or in Roll, after the
Spanish Fashion, &c., 1674.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. *A Brief Description of … Coffee*, Broadside, 1674 © The British Library Board, C.20.f

Figure 2. *Morat Coffee House Token* courtesy of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.